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ABSTRACT

This report provides an overview of selected state initiatives related to the training and supervision of paraeducators serving students with disabilities. The five states highlighted in the document were selected because of the significant work each has done in the area of paraeducators. In all five states, paraeducator initiatives began prior to the amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), but efforts have been strengthened since that time. The states are Iowa, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Utah, and Washington. Results from interviews and a review of the states' documents indicated changes occurring since the 1997 amendments to IDEA. These changes include: (1) renewed emphasis on paraeducator preparation; (2) continued focus on building infrastructure; (3) development of state-level policies that set standards and guidelines for paraeducators and the professionals that direct their work; and (4) development of personnel preparation opportunities for teachers who direct the work of paraeducators. All of the states carried out a needs assessment of paraeducators, the teachers, and the administrators, established stakeholder and interagency collaborative groups to design, develop, and evaluate initiatives, and created policies through legislation to guide the development of paraeducator standards, guidelines, and competencies. (CR)

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF STATE DIRECTORS OS SPECIAL EDUCATION, INC.

QUICK TURN AROUND

PROJECT FORUM

QTA – A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF A CRITICAL ISSUE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

STATE LEVEL INITIATIVES RELATED TO TRAINING AND SUPERVISION OF PARAEDUCATORS

By
TERI WALLACE &
KENT GERLACH

JUNE 2001

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Quick Turn Around

Project FORUM

QTA – A brief analysis of a critical issue in special education

State Level Initiatives Related to Training and Supervision of Paraeducators

June 2001

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Overview

As stated in the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), state education agency (SEA) personnel standards shall "allow paraprofessionals and assistants who are appropriately trained and supervised, in accordance with State law, regulations, or written policy…to be used to assist in the provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities…" [20 U.S.C. §1412(a)(15)(B)(iii)]. Many states are struggling with how to respond to this statement in the law. Some states have built credentialing systems, others are working on building infrastructures to prepare this critical workforce, and still others have established legislation that provides direction. This QTA provides an overview of selected state initiatives related to the training and supervision of paraeducators. Please note that while the field increasingly uses the term *paraeducator*, in legislation the word used is *paraprofessional*; therefore, the terms *paraprofessional* and *paraeducator* are used interchangeably in this document.

Methodology

The five states highlighted in this document were selected because of the significant work each has done in the area of paraeducators. In all five states, paraeducator initiatives began prior to the 1997 amendments to IDEA, but efforts have been strengthened since that time. The states are Iowa, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Utah, and Washington. In each state, the person(s) most knowledgeable about the paraeducator inititatives[1] was contacted and asked to submit written responses to questions regarding their initiatives. Upon receipt of the written responses, telephone and face-to-face interviews were conducted. In addition, state documents (e.g., training materials, guidelines, competencies, and policy statements) were reviewed. This study was conducted as part of Project FORUM's Cooperative Agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

Iowa

In 1995, a needs assessment was conducted in Iowa by the SEA and Drake University to gather information on personnel issues. Six focus groups were conducted across the state to identify areas in need of paraprofessional services. The groups consisted of paraeducators (two groups),

[1] Interviewees were either employees of the state education agency or an institution of higher education in the state.

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administrators, support and related staff, general and special education teachers, and parents. This needs assessment and the changing roles of teachers and paraprofessionals were the impetus for Iowa's initiatives that followed.

Iowa held its first state paraeducator conference in 1996. Since then, area education agencies (intermediate units) have been able to apply for state Part B discretionary funds to support training for paraeducators. The training takes many forms and is based on local needs. Also, in recent years there have been increased professional development opportunities for paraeducators at community colleges.

In 1998, legislation was introduced to certify paraeducators. This was the beginning of the work between the Board of Educational Examiners and the SEA. In 1998, the *Guide for Effective Paraeducator Practices in Iowa* was printed (Iowa Department of Education, 1998). This guide includes rules/regulations related to paraeducators, suggested guidelines for effective paraeducator services, recommendations for improving paraeducator services, checklist for principals, a family guide to paraeducator services, and other information. The guide was a collaborative effort involving paraeducators, area education agency consultants, general and special education teachers, staff developers, community college faculty, district administrators, SEA consultants, and parents.

Following publication of the guide, a stakeholder committee was formed in 1999 to identify competencies for paraeducators and make recommendations for certification requirements. The Board of Educational Examiners developed the rules for certification, and the SEA developed the standards for paraeducator preparation programs.

Iowa now has legislative standards for a voluntary multi-level paraeducator certification system and a paraeducator preparation program. The rules for certification outline the standards and competencies a paraeducator must demonstrate in order to become certified. Level I is Generalist and Level II is Generalist with Area(s) of Concentration. A second option for Level II certification is Level II Advanced, the state's career ladder option that could lead to teacher licensure. An applicant for any paraeducator certificate must have completed an approved paraeducator preparation program (non-degree program). The performance of paraeducator candidates is measured against state certification standards adopted by the Board of Educational Examiners under Iowa Code and the institution's learning outcomes. The certificate is valid for five years.

Each institution choosing to offer a training program for paraeducator certification must be approved by the Iowa State Board of Education. Presently, there is a collaborative effort among area education agencies and community colleges in the state to develop paraeducator preparation programs, with the goal of creating a statewide system for training paraeducators.

In December 2000, 21 paraeducators were the first to complete the training for state certification. The response of paraeducators has been overwhelmingly positive, even though there is no guarantee that certification will lead to an increase in salary and the certification is voluntary.

One of Iowa's challenges is determining how to promote the use of a voluntary certification system.

Iowa has the following priorities for the future: (1) develop a framework to evaluate the effectiveness of the paraeducator initiatives; (2) identify training needs of professionals who supervise paraprofessionals; (3) establish requirements for certification renewal; and (4) consider additional areas of concentration for certification (e.g., speech and language).

Minnesota

Minnesota is in its twelfth year of implementing planned activities related to preparing and supporting its paraprofessional workforce. The Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, the SEA, and the University of Minnesota's Institute on Community Integration (ICI) have collaborated on the planning, implementation and continuous improvement of these activities with advisement from Minnesota's Statewide Paraprofessional Consortium. The Consortium is an interagency group of educators, paraprofessionals, union representatives, state agency staff, administrators, parents, professional organizations, and higher education representatives. This group, fiscally supported by the SEA, first convened in 1988 and meets six times a year. Minnesota paraeducator initiatives are evaluated at annual planning and review sessions by the Consortium members.

Beginning in 1994, a needs assessment addressing paraprofessionals has been conducted every three years. Some data can be compared across years. This information has been used to guide paraprofessional activities in Minnesota from informing policy to determining content for the annual statewide paraprofessional conference.

Based on the work done by the Council for Exceptional Children (Council for Exceptional Children, 1998), Minnesota developed core and specialized competencies for paraeducators and is continuing to develop training that is aligned with these competencies. In addition, Minnesota has developed competencies for teachers who direct the work of paraprofessionals based on a state survey validating the knowledge and skills needed by individuals in such positions. The state is currently developing training for supervisors of paraeducators based on the competencies, with the intent of conducting inservice training around the state and providing information to faculty and staff at preservice teaching training programs.

The Minnesota Omnibus Bill of 1998 (Paraprofessional Legislation) requires local school boards to ensure that paraprofessionals are adequately trained and supervised. The *Minnesota Paraprofessional Guide* (Wallace, Bernhardt & Utermarck, 1999), a systems development guide, helps local school boards address this requirement. In addition, there is a day and a half meeting every two years with state leadership, Consortium members, and content experts aimed at building the capacity of local school personnel to coordinate paraprofessional staff development for their districts. Web-based training for paraprofessionals, aligned with competencies and community college infrastructures, offers flexibility and career path options. In addition, Minnesota's general education staff development policy was changed to include paraprofessionals several years ago.

Minneosta recognizes paraeducator excellence using a variety of strategies, including the governor's proclamation of Minnesota Paraprofessional Recognition Week, Paraprofessional of the Year, and Paraprofessional/Teacher Team of the Year. Information of interest to paraeducators is disseminated through a statewide newsletter, ParaLink, and via a web site.

Despite reported increases in time for licensed staff and paraprofessionals to plan together, interviewees expressed concern about a lack of understanding on the part of some teachers and administrators regarding the importance of common planning time. Because paraprofessionals are only hired to work during student hours, release time must be granted for staff development and planning with licensed staff. This is a challenge in light of the critical shortage of substitutes. Without planning time, it is difficult for paraprofessionals to be recognized as full members of the instructional team. There is also concern that the shortage of teachers can lead to the inappropriate use of paraprofessionals.

Minnesota's State Improvement Grant from OSEP will provide funds to support activities related to paraprofessionals for the next five years. A goal of the Consortium is to consider the development of a certification system for paraprofessionals. The system would have levels corresponding to Minnesota's competencies and create a career ladder reflective of the various levels.

Rhode Island

The Rhode Island SEA established a task force in 1994 as part of its Comprehensive System of Personnel Development to study teacher assistant (paraeducator) issues in the state. This task force included representatives from community college programs, teacher education programs, unions, teacher associations, professional organizations, and parents. In 1996, the Rhode Island Association for Teacher Assistants, a statewide professional organization, was established.

Legislation passed in 1997 directed the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to "coordinate the development of program standards for a training program for teacher assistants." As a result, in 1998 the SEA established a new task force that developed competencies for teacher assistants who are employed by school districts to work with all children and youth of all ability levels, birth through 21 years of age. Since 1998, new guidelines also have been developed for teacher assistants working with students who have English as a second language, teacher assistants working under the supervision of a classroom teacher with students with speech/language impairments, and supervision and performance evaluation related to teacher assistants.

Other personnel development initiatives related to paraeducators in Rhode Island are: (1) Regional Teacher Assistant Networks; (2) statewide training of trainers related to the Instructional Team Model, as well as for teacher assistants working with students with speech/language impairments and with students for whom English is a second language; (3) a quarterly newsletter for teacher assistants; and (4) professional development resources related to working with teacher assistants that are made available to school districts, teacher preparation programs, and approved teacher assistant training programs.

In 2000, Rhode Island began a project where a consultant works with higher education programs to embed training for teacher supervisors into preservice teacher preparation programs. In 2001, a task force completed a study on the use of teacher assistants and other personnel who work with students who have challenging behaviors. During 2001-2002, a task force will be established to identify core competencies for teacher assistants working with this population.

Rhode Island's initiatives have increased awareness statewide of the nature and importance of the role of the teacher assistant as a valued member of the instructional team. In the future, the state's paraeducator activities will be continued, expanded, and refined as needed. However, Rhode Island faces some challenges, which include: (1) finding resources to continue and refine the strategies described above; (2) appropriately implementing state standards and guidelines in all school districts; (3) developing guidelines related to job-specific teacher assistant assignments (e.g., disability areas); (4) obtaining resources to compensate teacher assistants for career ladder advancement; and (5) helping districts "find time" for personnel development activities for the entire instructional team given many competing priorities.

Utah

In Utah, there have been two state-level initiatives related to paraeducators. One addresses paraprofessionals serving students in K-12 programs, and the other addresses paraprofessionals working in early childhood programs.

In 1993-94, the Utah Legislature mandated the development of state standards for paraprofessionals in public schools. As a result, the SEA funded a five-year project in 1993-94 entitled the *Statewide Personnel Development of the Effective Involvement of Paraprofessionals in Special Education.* During the first year of funding, a state task force of school district, SEA, and higher education participants developed state standards for paraprofessionals in special education. The standards addressed two key issues: 1) the need for defining and clarifying specific job roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals related to data collection, implementation of instruction, behavior management, and monitoring of student progress; and 2) the need for effective supervision of paraprofessionals by licensed and/or certified personnel. The standards were approved by the Utah Board of Education in May of 1995.

Also during the mid 1990's, the SEA completed a series of needs assessment activities to determine the status of paraprofessional involvement in the education of children with disabilities. These activities included: (1) surveys of special education administrators, teachers, and higher education administrators and faculty; (2) reports from nationally recognized consultants; and (3) reviews of the research literature on the role and effective involvement of special education paraprofessionals.

To address state and district needs, the project identified three key objectives:

- Develop and implement a statewide training program for special education administrators that addresses competencies needed to develop district-wide policies for paraprofessionals in special education.

- Develop and implement a statewide training program for special education teachers and related services personnel who have direct supervision responsibilities.
- Develop and implement statewide training for paraprofessionals who have educational and related service responsibilities for children with disabilities and their families.

Utah currently has statewide training programs for paraprofessionals and teachers related to effective and appropriate use of paraeducators. The preservice distance education program for paraprofessionals at Salt Lake Community College has approved articulation agreements that stipulate a person who completes the paraprofessional associate degree may enter any state teacher preparation program in special and elementary education as a junior.

In 1995, competencies were developed for paraprofessionals working in early intervention and adopted by the Utah Department of Health, Baby Watch Early Intervention Program. There are six areas of competencies and within each area there are levels of competency from paraprofessional through supervisor. A four-tiered credentialing process permits early intervention staff to move easily from the paraprofessional to the supervisory level. All paraprofessionals working in early intervention must demonstrate these competencies.

Utah's Paraprofessional Consortium meets monthly to oversee and support ongoing paraeducator development. This advisory group includes: personnel from two- and four-year institutions of higher education, paraprofessionals, teachers, and school district administrators; as well as representatives from teacher and classified employee unions, the Department of Health, professional associations (e.g., Council for Exceptional Children), and the SEA (including Title I and special education). Many members of the Consortium also serve on the committee that plans the annual state paraeducator conference. The Utah Parent Center collaborates by presenting and setting up a booth at the annual paraeducator conference.

Challenges related to Utah's paraeducator initiatives include: (1) building and maintaining collaborative efforts across all stakeholders; (2) educating district administrators about the goals and objectives of the initiatives; (3) institutionalizing training programs; (4) transferring ownership for ongoing paraeducator development at a state and district level to all stakeholders; (5) increasing options, support and funding for paraeducator training; (6) increasing awareness of training and career development opportunities for paraprofessionals at a state and district level; and (7) building an effective network of communication to disseminate information at a building, district and state level.

Utah's recently awarded State Improvement Grant (SIG) will support paraeducators initiatives at the state and district levels in the near future. It is also hoped that the SIG will stimulate legislative action supporting paraeducators.

Washington

In 1994, the state funded the Washington Education Association (WEA) to examine issues related to paraeducators, including training needs. This initiative, the Washington Paraeducator Project, developed minimum competencies for paraeducators in the state based on work done by the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals and Pickett and Gerlach (1997). These

competencies became part of the state's regulations. The Washington Paraeducator Project had an advisory council that expanded over the years and involved many stakeholders. At the time of the project's completion, the advisory council consisted of three persons from unions representing paraeducators, two WEA representatives, one National Education Association representative, five paraeducators, a representative from Center for Visually Impaired, three SEA representatives (special education, teacher certification, nursing), two Educational Service District (intermediate education unit) representatives, two community college representatives, four local education agency (LEA) directors, one university representative, one parent, and one LEA human resource specialist.

Since the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA, the state's regulations have been changed to require school districts to have procedures in place that ensure paraeducators receive training to meet the state recommended core competencies. Specifics regarding length and substance of the training is left to the local districts. In addition, coursework on supervision is now required for special education endorsement.

Another impetus for the state's initiatives was a 1995 federal monitoring report that indicated a lack of training for paraeducators. The state now funds the Bates Technical College Paraeducator Training Program, which is video training for paraeducators on the competencies and other topics. The video training targets rural and remote districts, however any paraeducator in the state has access to the training. The Bates Project advisory board consists of three LEA directors (primarily special education directors), one parent, one district personnel manager, one SEA representative, one private school representative (Native American school), two paraeducators, and one person from a union that represents paraeducators.

As a result of the initiatives described above, interviewees reported that school districts in Washington are more cognizant of how important it is to have trained personnel working with children and youth, have taken more ownership of state initiatives, and have more local initiatives. Also, paraeducators are requesting continuous staff development. Since 1991, the intermediate education units have received a special appropriation for training all paraeducators, totaling $8.5 million. This has been spent primarily on training materials and stipends for paraeducators.

Challenges continue in Washington because school districts are concerned that paraeducator competencies and training will be part of future bargaining agreements. Another concern is the lack of training for teachers in how to direct and supervise paraeducators' work.

In the future, the WEA will continue to provide training in the core competencies for paraeducators, and the Education Service Districts (ESDs) will have teams provide training upon request. Efforts are being made by the ESDs to provide training through the state K-12 interactive video system. Training manuals are currently being revised by local school districts to be used for in-house training initiatives. The Bates Project will continue with video development and is also investigating the possibility of placing training on the local public television station.

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Summary

While all five states' paraeducator initiatives began before the 1997 amendments to IDEA, the requirements of the law did generate change. Specifically, changes included: (1) renewed emphasis on paraeducator preparation; (2) continued focus on building infrastructure; (3) development of state-level policies that set standards and guidelines for paraeducators and the professionals that direct their work; and (4) development of personnel preparation opportunities for teachers who direct the work of paraeducators.

Table 1 summarizes information on when and why the state initiatives began, and what level of state staff support is provided.

Table 1
Summary of Key State Information

State	Year Initiatives Began	Impetus for Initial Initiatives	SEA Staff Support
Iowa	1995	Needs assessment, changing roles of teachers and paraeducators	1.0 FTE*
Minnesota	1989	Increase in numbers of paraeducators, changing roles of paraeducators, need for paraeducator training	.33 FTE
Rhode Island	1994	State legislation, growth of paraprofessional workforce	Not provided
Utah	1993	Due process hearing related to district employment and use of paraprofessionals, legislative mandate for standards for paraprofessionals in special education	Not provided
Washington	1995	Recommendation from OSEP during state monitoring	1.0 FTE

* FTE = full time equivalent

Table 2 illustrates common elements of the state-level paraeducator initiatives in the five states that were part of this study.

Table 2
Paraeducator Activities by State

Activity Type	Iowa	Minnesota	Rhode Island	Utah	Washington
Policy development	▪	▪	▪	▪	
Statewide needs assessment	▪	▪	▪	▪	
Dissemination (e.g., websites, newsletters)	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
Standard or competency development	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
Training for paraeducators	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
Training for teacher supervisors		▪	▪	▪	▪
Statewide conference for paraeducators	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪

A number of themes are common across the five states' paraeducator initiatives. All states carried out the following:

- Conducted needs assessments of paraeducators, the teachers who direct their work, and the administrators who supervise the positions to determine needs and set priorities.
- Established stakeholder and interagency collaborative groups to design, develop, and evaluate initiatives, including representatives from two- and four-year degree granting programs.
- Secured SEA leadership in building an infrastructure to support effective training and supervision of paraeducators.
- Funded most initiatives with state Part B discretionary money, and more recently with State Improvement Grant (SIG) dollars (IDEA Part D funds).
- Developed a strong partnership between the SEA and institutions of higher education.
- Created policies through legislation to guide the development of paraeducator standards, guidelines, and competencies.
- Discovered the importance of establishing a paraeducator knowledge and skills base as a foundation for training.
- Created partnerships to develop a variety of strategies for delivering training to paraeducators.
- Built staff capacity at educational service centers, local education agencies, and institutions of higher education to provide training through train-the-trainer sessions and other methods.

A final theme was the clear and obvious reliance state representatives had on one another. They spoke of learning from the work of others by sharing information and strategies at national conferences, especially the National Paraprofessional Conference sponsored by the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals. Learning from each other's successes and challenges was common among these five states and provided the power for creating success. They also noted the positive influence of one specific individual, Anna Lou Pickett, founder of the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals. Each interviewee mentioned her name in regard to paraeducator initiatives in their respective states.

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